

Wednesday, April 8, 2009

## Curfew, teen space among suggestions for downtown area

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

[E-mail this article](#) \ [Print this article](#)

In response to a fight at a youth concert last month, residents near downtown Silver Spring have suggested a curfew for teens downtown and space dedicated for youth events while officials will enforce a time and decibel level limit on downtown events.

The efforts from police, officials and residents are to limit conflicts between youth who frequently hang out downtown and adults who have felt threatened by the teens' behavior.

"There are few places for young people in the community to be," said Councilwoman Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring at a meeting of the Seven Oaks and Evanswood Civic Association, which is adjacent to the downtown area. "... You have to be careful that you share the space with all the people in this room."

On March 7, Mixed Unity, a youth group that formed after the shooting death of Montgomery Blair High School freshman Tai Lam on Nov. 1, 2008, held a "Stop the Violence" concert on Ellsworth Drive in Silver Spring, drawing about 7,000 people. At the end of the event a fight broke out, leading to 35 arrests or citations and concerns from SOECA residents.

At a neighborhood meeting Thursday at the Silver Spring Library, SOECA residents spoke with a panel including police, county officials and staff from Peterson Cos., the property manager of Downtown Silver Spring on Ellsworth Drive, about how to "ensure the community is a place all of us want to live," said Mark Gabriele, president of SOECA .

Measures are already in place to limit problems with future events, including an 8:30 p.m. cutoff for downtown events and restrictions on decibel levels for concerts, said Jennifer Nettles, manager of Downtown Silver Spring.

Because this will be the first summer without the artificial turf field at Ellsworth and Fenton and Silver Spring offers more free events than most other communities, Nettles expects crowds to be even bigger this summer.

Police stressed the importance of "preplanning" for events, including asking transit services like Ride On to provide more buses during busy nights and doing research on musical acts to better gauge crowds, said Lt. Paul Liquorie of the Montgomery County Police Third District.

There were 30 police and private security officers patrolling the March 7 concert, with an additional 45 responding to the violence. Organizers had expected about 2,500 people.

"I make it a habit not to underestimate young people and I underestimated the power of them getting the word out," said Richard Jaeggi, an adult supervisor of Mixed Unity.

About 10 members of Mixed Unity were in attendance Thursday night and did receive praise from the residents for attempting a concert with a positive message. The youths said they regretted the way the concert ended but the violence will only make their efforts toward nonviolence even stronger.

"The point was not attracting those who know about nonviolence but those who deal with violence," said Sandrine Emambu, a Blair junior. "... If you attract those who deal with violence you make an impact on someone."

Silver Spring resident Elaine Ellis distributed a list of residents' suggestions to make sure teens did not cause nuisance problems downtown. Those included a 10 p.m. curfew for minors not accompanied by adults, stringent age enforcement at R-rated films and even a ban on particularly violent movies at the Majestic Theater on Ellsworth Drive.

The community also suggested two potential sites for space dedicated for youth events: the vacant Old Blair Auditorium on Wayne Avenue, which is currently undergoing a community renovation design process, and the site of the current Silver Spring Library, which will be vacant when the proposed new Silver Spring Library is constructed.

"We need to think about other solutions than policing our way out of this," Ellis said.

Both Nettles and Liquorie said because Ellsworth Drive has been deemed a public street – Peterson leases the property from the county – residents have all their First Amendment rights and a curfew would not be possible. But they said a system could be set up where teens are given incentives like coupons for good behavior and those who cause problems could eventually receive citations.

"We have to maintain First Amendment rights," Nettles said. "... But we know these teens and we can talk to them on a different level."

Residents were concerned about a gang presence along Ellsworth Drive and during the March 7 concert. Liquorie said gang officers were at the concert because of its large presence of youth but there is no indication the fights were gang-related.

There are gang members that visit downtown Silver Spring, but, contrary to some residents' beliefs, "it's not anybody's turf," Liquorie said and if you are in a gang, "our officers will make it less comfortable for you to be there."

